

Ecumenical Cognitivism, Ecumenical Expressivism and Moral Disagreement



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Acknowledgements

In studying metaethics I have occasionally had trouble seeing the wood for the trees. There are just so many different theories and variations on theories that beckon. This is why, first of all, I would like to thank my supervisor Mike Ridge for having suggested exploring this rich topic in the first place. I definitely take away from this paper a deeper understanding of metaethics and a sense of where I myself stand in the metaethical debate.

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[Abstract: In this paper I compare ecumenical cognitivism (EC) and ecumenical expressivism (EE) to find out which of these explains moral disagreement best. After narrowing this down to fundamental moral disagreement, I argue that EE and EC are equally well-placed to resort to typical expressivist explanatory strategies of moral disagreement such as *disagreement in attitude*. Following this, I confront both theories with a challenge. First, I take up the charge that EC fails to preserve the required links between talk of truth/falsity of moral claims and talk of moral disagreement. Drawing on a synthetic reductionist version of EC, I argue that EC can survive this challenge unscathed. Second, I present the charge that EE cannot account for the propriety of standing your ground in moral disagreement because in conflicts that bottom out in preferences, such a move is not allowed. I argue that a response suggesting that some preferences are psychologically ‘special’ and therefore do allow ground-standing, fails and that therefore EE does not survive the challenge. Key words: ecumenical expressivism, synthetic moral naturalism, moral disagreement.]

1. Introduction

Moral judgment has been called “Janus-faced” (Ridge 2014: 2; Smith 1992: 4-6). By this it is meant that moral judgments have both belief-like and desire-like features. Their belief-like quality shines through in ordinary sentences such as “Kant does not *believe* in animal rights,” and, more implicitly, “Young Augustine *knew* it was wrong, and yet he stole and squandered the pears anyway”—implicitly, because knowledge entails belief. Indeed, these sentences seem every bit as factual and truth-apt as the belief that there is a hole in my sock. In addition, we often engage in moral reasoning with moral claims serving as inference-licensing premises or the conclusion in our arguments.¹

At the same time, there seems to be a deep connection between our moral judgments and our motivation to act. Intuitively, if somebody told you that eating meat is wrong and, moments after, you catch her at a barbecue chewing on a bratwurst, something would seem off. Indeed, you would probably start to think she was being insincere or facetious when she told you earlier that eating meat is immoral. Either that or you might consider special circumstances: perhaps it was the only food available and she did not want to call attention to herself or she was suddenly overcome with hunger. At any rate, the important point is that if she really believed eating meat is immoral, then—absent such a special explanation—she would not have eaten the bratwurst. In addition, the fact that there is and has been persisting disagreement over sundry moral issues, both between and within cultures, seems more likely to be the result of conflicting temperaments than a failure to appreciate all the relevant non-normative facts.

For philosophers working in metaethics these observations are discomfiting. For, it is generally believed that the Humean depiction of beliefs and desires as distinct mental states that do very different things is accurate. To explain what it is they do, the notion *direction of fit* is usually invoked (Anscombe 1957). Beliefs aim to fit with or represent a given way the world is but do not spur us to action—at least not without the help of a desire. Desires, on the other hand, aim to make the world fit with what they are after, but do not represent anything and so are not capable of being true or false.

In recent decades, so-called hybrid or ‘ecumenical’ theories have emerged to better accommodate this dual aspect of moral judgment. Very generally, these theories hold that moral judgments consist *both* in a belief-component and a desire-component, or

¹ For a more in-depth survey of belief-like features, see Brink 1989: 14-36.

alternatively, that moral utterances express *both* of these (Ridge & Kohler 2015). Ecumenical theories can be divided into two subsets: ecumenical cognitivism (EC) and ecumenical expressivism (EE). It is tempting to explain the difference between these two in terms of which component they see as primary, but that would be rather unilluminating. A better way of putting it is that although both make mention of beliefs and desires in explaining moral judgment, only EC accepts beliefs *with robustly representational normative, including moral, content*.

The aim of this paper is to analyse which of these two ecumenical theories does better in explaining moral disagreement. It does not take a stand on which theory is better all-things-considered—this would require analysing a host of other thorny issues related to moral judgment. Further, given the manifold varieties of EC, I shall only be concerned with what Michael Ridge has dubbed ‘Judgment-Individuating EC,’ because it takes seriously the desire-like features of moral judgment as they pertain to moral *thought* in particular.

One reason I focus on ecumenical theories is that, as relatively young research programs, they are yet to be fully explored. Another reason is that they break away from the traditional metaethical debate between (non-ecumenical) expressivism and (non-ecumenical, cognitivist) moral realism, which, increasingly, is seen as trading on a “false dichotomy” between beliefs and desires (Ridge 2014: 6).²

Before I say how this paper is structured, I want to clarify what I mean by ‘moral judgment.’ By ‘moral’ I mean what is typically (though not necessarily) referred to in terms such as ‘right’, ‘good’, ‘fair’, ‘ought’, ‘must’, etc. By ‘judgment,’ I mean a (dispositional) psychological state—not an activity, state-content, capacity or virtue (Cullity 2011). Lastly, since calling the utterances through which moral judgments are expressed themselves ‘moral judgments’ has the effect of blurring the distinction between moral thought and moral language, I will steer clear of this usage.

This paper is structured as follows. The first section examines EC and EE, drawing extensively from Ridge’s seminal book *Impassioned Belief*, and is largely of an expository nature (Ridge 2014).³ The second and longer section has a more critical and argumentative slant. After introducing the notion of moral disagreement and a potential explanatory strategy, each theory is confronted with a powerful challenge.

² Straddling this divide is the error theory, which combines cognitivism about moral judgment with anti-realism about moral properties and moral facts.

³ For an earlier statement of EE, see Ridge 2006 and Ridge 2007.

2. Two Types of Ecumenical Theories

Put simply, there are two ways of ‘going ecumenical.’ Either you start out with a cognitivist conception of moral judgment and then try to integrate a desire-like element, or you take up an expressivist conception and then bring in a belief-like element. To repeat, both of these depart from the metaethical orthodoxy of explaining either the belief-like features of moral judgment in purely expressivist terms or the desire-like features in purely cognitivist terms—projects which Michael Ridge has memorably compared to “trying to fit a square peg in a round hole” (Ridge 2014: 6). Since these two approaches aim to occupy the same logical space, albeit from opposing angles, they are in effect dialectical counterparts.

2.1. Ecumenical Cognitivism

Ecumenical Cognitivism comes in many varieties. It would take up too much space to scrutinize all or even some of these varieties, so I will focus on the particular subset that I deem most plausible, *viz.*, Judgment-Individuating EC. Yet it may be instructive to take a step back and show how we get to this variety from EC *simpliciter*.

Ridge characterizes EC in terms of commitments in the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of language (2014: 77-81). These can be spelled out in two theses:

- I. Moral judgments consist of beliefs with normative representational contents.
- II. Moral claims express beliefs with the same normative representational content, plus a corresponding desire-like attitude.

The first thesis puts the ‘cognitivism’ in ‘ecumenical cognitivism’. To be sure, the various brands of moral realism are also committed to this. The second thesis brings in the ecumenical element but in a way that leaves open the strength of the connection between the desire-like attitude and the moral judgment.

Implicative forms of EC see this connection as relatively weak insofar as the desire-like attitude is not thought to be expressed literally and ‘alongside’ the belief but, rather,

as pragmatically conveyed through a conversational or conventional implicature.⁴ Relatedly, these theories do not see the having of a desire-like attitude by the agent in question as essential to moral judgment. I find this outcome unacceptable. As Ridge insists, the desire-like features of moral judgment pertain not just to moral discourse but also to moral thought (2014: 87). And since we often keep our thoughts to ourselves, these features inevitably fall outside the purview of this sort of purely discourse-based explanation given by Implicative EC.⁵

By contrast, Judgment-Individuating EC does not neglect this psychological dimension. On this view, the having of an associated desire-like attitude is essential, i.e., a necessary condition for judging that *phi*-ing is wrong. Judgment-Individuating EC (hereafter ‘EC’) can further be divided into versions where the desire-like state of mind is a constitutive part of the moral judgment, and versions where it is rather an external or causal feature (see, respectively, Jackson & Pettit 1995; Tresan 2006).

I want to finish this subsection by rendering intelligible what the essential link between desires and beliefs consists in according to EC. Recall the apparent motivating or action-guiding role of moral judgment discussed in the introduction. We do not merely inductively associate moral judgments with corresponding motivations to take action—the connection seems to be *a priori*. Accordingly, Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit have proposed that, analogously to how judgments of colour and *modus ponens* must involve, respectively, sensation and an inferential disposition, moral judgment must involve desire, because it is partially constituted by a certain pattern of (non-intellectual) dispositions. Namely, judging something as fair entails identifying certain exemplary instances of fairness in “more or less ostensive fashion,” picking out saliently similar instances off the back of these, being critical and sensitive towards discrepancies between potential instances of fairness, identifying the former—all else equal—with what is the right thing to do and, lastly, choosing and desiring to do the right thing and expecting others to do the same for what they identify as the right thing (Jackson & Pettit 1995: 33-35).

⁴ For a detailed examination, see Fletcher 2014.

⁵ Defenders of Implicative EC have tried to blunt this objection by calling attention to certain features of normative speech that seem to be absent in moral thought—e.g., the pressure it puts on people to change their attitudes—and by arguing that in many other respects thought resembles language. For instance, Stephen Finlay writes that moral judgments often appear as “internalizations of speech” with “pragmatically influenced features” such as “patterns of ellipsis (...) sarcasm, metaphor, and hyperbole.” (Finlay 2008: 120).

2. 2. Ecumenical Expressivism

Ecumenical Expressivism, EC's dialectical counterpart, can be counted an offshoot of the long-standing expressivist/non-cognitivist tradition associated with such philosophers as C.L. Stevenson, A.J. Ayer, Alan Gibbard and Simon Blackburn. As it happens, EE is not as diversified a view as EC. This should make the job of examining EE more straightforward, were it not that it has been worked out in much more detail. The philosopher who did all this work is Michael Ridge, and *Impassioned Belief* is largely dedicated to its defense. While this paper is concerned only with moral judgment, it is important to mention that EE is equally a theory about normative judgment, the genus that moral judgment is a part of.

EE can also be summarized in two theses:

- I. Moral judgments consist in hybrid compounds of mental states, i.e., desire-like attitudes and beliefs with non-normative representational content that are appropriately related.
- II. Moral claims express these hybrid compounds.

The first thesis steers between a full denial of cognitivism—ruling out representational states as such in the style of old-school or ‘caveman’ expressivism—and embracing cognitivism wholesale by accepting beliefs that include normative representational content. Of course, the latter would have EE collapsing into EC. My discussion of EE goes from the meaning of moral terms, addressing the second thesis, to the composition of moral judgment.

Before saying anything substantial about the meaning of moral, and more broadly, normative terms, Ridge points out that he is only interested in these terms as they are used in *practically normative claims*. To recognize these, he suggests we attend to their function: they tend to be used to “settle ‘the thing to do’ and the ‘thing to intend’” (Ridge 2014: 19). Now, what does a moral claim of the sort “X is good” mean? Essentially, it means “X would be highly ranked by any acceptable (fitting, worthy) standard of practical reasoning”, with the practically normative context of utterance fixing *the standard of practical reasoning* as the relevant kind of standard (2014: 26). To illustrate how this context-dependence works, take a non-normative use of ‘good,’ such as the sentence “x is no good” uttered by a logger pointing at a sequoia tree. This

is paraphrased as follows: “x would be ranked lowly by any standard of commercially felling trees for their wood”.⁶ (Although standards are presented as a fundamental category, Ridge is happy to explicate this notion as “a rule or principle that is used as a basis of judgment” or, alternatively, as a universal prescription or a conditional imperative of the sort: “In circumstances C, do p!” (2014: 25-26).)

Crucially, in moral contexts, what makes a given standard of practical reasoning ‘acceptable’ is *not* part of the semantics of ‘good’ but, rather, depends on what we (tacitly) take to guide our deliberations about what to intend and do. The reason this is crucial to EE can be stated in a general and a more specific sense. On the one hand, the act of *treating* something as a practically normative/moral standard is, thus construed, prior to something *being* a practically normative/moral standard, which is precisely what you would expect of an anti-realist metaethical theory. More specifically, EE hereby locates the normativity of moral judgment not in the literal meaning of ‘good’, which would commit it to a belief with normative representational content, but in our desire-like attitudes. A lot more can be said about the nature of acceptability—e.g., it does not impose any ‘substantive constraints;’ any standard can be adopted, no matter how bizarre (2014: 40). Even so, the important point is that it is a primitively normative concept whose meaning is explained meta-semantically rather than semantically.

This last sentence may sound puzzling. After all, did the foregoing paragraphs not already explain the meaning of ‘good’? Yes and no. Just as we may ask “What does this or that expression mean?”, we may also ask “In virtue of what does this expression (come to) have that meaning?” (Speaks 2014). And these questions give rise to very different sorts of theory of meaning. To put it differently:

One sort of theory of meaning—a *semantic theory*—is a specification of the meanings of the words and sentences of some symbol system. (...) A distinct sort of theory—a *foundational* [i.e., meta-semantic] *theory of meaning*—tries to explain what about some person or group gives the symbols of their language the meanings that they have. (Speaks 2014).

One added benefit of locating the concept of acceptability in meta-semantics is that, supposedly, EE can help itself to a standard truth-conditional semantics of normative

⁶ To be sure, the sequoia would be ranked lowly because giant sequoias are forbidden to chop down, and because sequoia wood burns too quickly and is too soft and brittle to use for building or furniture.

discourse, including predicates with extensions, and propositions. This is usually taken to count in favor of a metaethical theory (Ridge 2014: 42).⁷

So, what is the meta-semantics of ‘acceptable’? Ridge turns to a framework called *ideationalism*, which he sums up as the view that “facts about the semantic contents of meaningful items in natural languages are constituted by facts about how those items are conventionally used to express states of mind” (2014: 107). Pioneered by the philosopher Paul Grice, ideationalism reduces the meaning of a word to what speakers mean by using this word, and what speakers mean is reduced to their intentions—or to be more precise, to what these intentions indicate.

This meta-semantic explanation of acceptability in terms of mental states thus leads naturally to the composition of those states (2014: 118-121). Put simply, moral judgments consist in a so-called ‘normative perspective’ and a related representational belief. Now, Ridge is aware that most people do not cling to a well-formulated or overarching standard and that some people even refuse to choose to accept any. This is why he opts for a negative construal of normative perspectives. More precisely, he takes these as ‘works in progress,’ consisting in a set of relatively stable higher-order policies governing our desire-like attitudes that count *against* accepting certain kinds of standards of deliberation (2014: 115). In addition, the fact that they are undergirded by certain emotional dispositions is what causes their stability.

We can now give a full picture of the composition of moral judgments. Moral claims such as “X is good” express hybrid belief/desire pairs that consist in a ‘belief’—though one without full representational content—of the type “X would be highly ranked by any *acceptable* standard of practical reasoning” that are constituted by a token normative perspective and the token belief “that X would be highly ranked by any *admissible* standard of practical reasoning. Crucially, these tokens are appropriately related in that, as Ridge clarifies, they are “logically” related: “the concept of ‘admissible’ [adverts] to standards of practical reason whose acceptance is not ruled out by the perspective” (2014: 119).

⁷ For a critical reception of this move towards meta-semantics and its rewards, see Alwood 2016.

3. Explaining Moral Disagreement

In this final section, I want to use our newly gained understanding of ecumenical theories to find out which of these explains moral disagreement best. While not something I deliberately aim towards, this might help a little to solve the bigger ecumenical puzzle about which of these *qua* theory of moral judgment is to be preferred overall.

This section is divided into four parts. I start out by making clear what sort of moral disagreement I have in mind. Following this, I introduce the idea of *disagreement in attitude* as a potential explanatory strategy. After inspecting to what extent this strategy is available to EE and EC, I confront each with a powerful challenge. The first of these is Michael Ridge's objection that even the most plausible form of EC, i.e., a synthetic reductionist one, fails to respect certain conceptual links between the truth/falsity of moral (normative) claims and claims of moral (normative) disagreement. The second reiterates David Enoch's charge that expressivist theories cannot explain the propriety of standing your ground in moral disagreement.

3.1. Locating Moral Disagreement

The sort of moral disagreement that I am interested in is *fundamental* moral disagreement. I mean by this broadly what Ridge describes as "a normative disagreement based neither on conceptual confusion nor on further disagreement about any non-normative facts consider[ed] relevant" (Ridge 2014: 64).⁸ To begin with, the appeal to conceptual confusion rests on the presupposition that 'good' can be defined in terms of a non-normative property. Since I agree with Ridge that in light of G.E. Moore's Open Question Argument any such definition is highly questionable, I will assume that there are cases in which this condition is satisfied (2014: 67).

Moving to the other condition, it certainly seems likely that there are at least some cases that satisfy this. First of all, there is the vast amount of seemingly intractable disputes over a myriad of moral issues: abortion, euthanasia, gendered bathrooms and

⁸ Cf. Folke Tersman: "A moral disagreement is rationally resolvable (...) to the extent that it can be attributed to a cognitive shortcoming of some sort, such as ignorance of relevant nonmoral evidence, or fallacious reasoning. Let us say that disagreements that cannot be attributed to such factors are "radical."" (Tersman 2009: 22).

pronouns, confederate statues, factory farmed animals, the treatment of migrants and resident-aliens, and gun control, to name just a few. And these cases are all from the present time. If we include such controversial issues of the past as slavery in the U.S., the status of Native Americans in the Spanish Empire or the sale of indulgences in the Catholic Church, the list of candidates grows exponentially longer.

It is not just the abundance of intractable disputes that makes it likely that there are cases of fundamental disagreement; it is also the sheer difficulty of specifying how a growing appreciation of the relevant non-normative facts would resolve these. To flesh this out, I suggest borrowing the notion of falsifiability, famously introduced by Karl Popper as a solution to the demarcation problem in the philosophy of science, i.e., the problem of how to distinguish between science and pseudoscience. Falsifiability is the idea that for a statement, hypothesis or theory to count as scientific there must be basic statements or possible observations that contradict it. Surprisingly, this criterion can double as a test of fundamental moral disagreement: if neither of the two parties in a moral disagreement are capable of stating what non-normative fact or possible observation would sink their case, then their disagreement is most likely fundamental.⁹

To illustrate, take the debate over gun control. Presumably, few staunch gun rights advocates would see their case refuted by any fact about the correlation between gun rights restrictions and the number of shootings. It seems far more plausible that they would concede the fact and stick to their guns, possibly because they desire individual liberty and self-reliance over a more sheltered life and the avoidance of bodily harm—even if more people are killed as a result! At this more fundamental level, it becomes harder to see how possible observations and yet-to-be-discovered facts could play an arbitrating role, and easier to see a fundamental difference in preferences. One upshot of this illustration, then, is that expressivists seem more comfortable with fundamental moral disagreement—this was mentioned already in the introduction.¹⁰

I realize I have said little about disagreement itself. First, like moral judgment I think of disagreement as a psychological state. Put succinctly: “The production of sentences

⁹ This does not deny the important point that people involved in moral disagreements can be mistaken about what it would take for them to revise their judgments (Ridge 2014: 66).

¹⁰ In fairness, one could also draw a more cognitivist-friendly conclusion, namely, that sometimes there are “no uniquely correct answers” to the extent that “[m]oral ties are possible, and considerations, each of which is objectively valuable, may be incommensurable” (Brink 1984: 116). Still, for this to match expressivism’s explanatory power, it would have to generalize to most if not all of these cases, including those where there is an extreme divergence in opinion. But this would commit one to saying that the predicate ‘good’ is “maximally vague,” which seems something of a last resort. Thanks to Michael Ridge for helping me on this point.

makes public our disagreements; it does not create them” (Huvenes 2017: 3). Consequently, something that sounds or looks like a disagreement might not actually be one, if what is asserted is not in fact believed by those who produce the assertions. Second, disagreement in this sense does not require interaction, only incompatibility: if I think Pluto is a planet and someone in New Zealand thinks it is not, then we agree even if we do not know about each other’s existence (2017: 2). Third, although in common parlance we speak of disagreeing or agreeing with this or that statement or proposition, I am only interested in interpersonal disagreement.

Thus far, we have grasped fundamental moral disagreement in a largely negative way, to wit, in terms of the *absence* of conceptual confusion and of disagreement about non-normative facts. In the next subsection, we will look at a more positive approach and see how this fits in with our ecumenical theories.

3. 2. Disagreement in Attitude

In *Impassioned Belief*, Michael Ridge goes through a slew of non-ecumenical cognitivist theories, i.e., the error theory, naïve subjectivism, moral non-naturalism, and analytic naturalism (or ‘moral functionalism’), before singling out synthetic reductionism as the most plausible one (Ridge 2014: 3, 60-76). Synthetic reductionism, which also goes by the name ‘Cornell realism,’ is plainly the view that the meaning of ‘good’ is equivalent to a certain naturalistic property. However, instead of basing this on how ‘good’ is defined or analysed and coming up against semantic intuitions, this conclusion is attained through empirical enquiry.¹¹

Earlier, we saw that (non-ecumenical) moral realist theories have difficulties explaining fundamental moral disagreement. Interestingly, synthetic reductionism seems to have at its disposal two new promising explanations. To begin with, the synthetic reductionist could argue that many fundamental moral disagreements are really in the process of being resolved as we stand to gain more insight into the complex properties that causally regulate and fix the reference of our shared moral terms. This is importantly different from a growing appreciation of the relevant non-normative facts, which we saw was a dead end, because, as David Merli has suggested, this process would involve idealized conditions with interlocutors re-examining their old views,

¹¹ For a good summary of synthetic reductionism, see Brink 2001.

reconsidering opposing views and intuitions, and generally seeking a maximally coherent ‘end-of-the-day theory’ (Merli 2002: 226-231). In some cases, certain opinions will prove untenable in light of this theory. In other cases, contrasting positions will be synthesized. Alternatively, the synthetic reductionist could say that although some disagreements are indeed irresolvable, they are also faultless since they figure different linguistic communities that have their moral terms regulated by different complex properties. Harking back to the gun control debate, it is not inconceivable that in this respect rural Americans are different from coastal, city-dwelling Americans.

Nonetheless, there are some obstacles the foregoing explanations have to overcome. Roughly, it appears the latter takes the friction out of moral disagreement whereas the former has trouble accommodating disagreement between very dissimilar cultures. This was first noticed by R.M. Hare in his famous parable of the missionary and the cannibals, which I will quote in full:

Let us suppose that a missionary, armed with a grammar book, lands on a cannibal island. The vocabulary of his grammar book gives him the equivalent, in the cannibal’s language, of the English word ‘good’. Let us suppose that, by a strange coincidence, the word is ‘good’. And let us suppose also, that it really is the equivalent—that it is, as the Oxford English Dictionary puts it, ‘the most general adjective of commendation’... If the missionary has mastered his vocabulary, he can, so long as he uses the word evaluatively and not descriptively, communicate with them about moral quite happily. They know that when he uses the word he is commending the person or object that he applies it to. The only thing they find odd is that he applies it to such unexpected people, people who are meek and gentle and do not collect large quantities of scalps; whereas they themselves are accustomed to commend people who are bold and burly and collect more scalps than the average. (Hare 1952: 148).

First of all, note how little difficulty expressivists have in explaining what is going on here between the missionary and the cannibal: they have opposing attitudes, i.e., disapproval and approval of the act of scalping people and, possibly, the properties that are conducive to this, constituting their disagreement. In short: they are disagreeing *in attitude*.¹² Disagreement in attitude is best understood as consisting in an

¹² The notion of disagreement in attitude was coined by C.L. Stevenson (Stevenson 1944: 3). Stevenson posits as an additional necessary condition the existence of a desire by at least one of the parties to *change* the other party’s attitude. However, I think Michael Ridge argues convincingly that this condition is unfounded because, as we saw earlier, in the case of disagreement in belief no such condition obtains, and disagreement in attitude is to structurally resemble this if it is part of the same genus. (Ridge 2014: 171).

incompatibility of attitudes, i.e., it is impossible for both to be satisfied. (In the example the incompatibility is between the desire that scalping continue and the desire that it end and, possibly, between the desire that the properties conducive to scalping continue to be admired and the desire that this stop.) Although EE is perhaps an unusual form of expressivism, there is nothing in principle that stops it from invoking the notion of disagreement in attitude. Granted, it might fill in the term ‘attitude’ with the more sophisticated notion of a normative perspective and have more to say about the semantics, but, ultimately, the explanatory strategy is the same.

Compared to the relative ease with which EE handles this case, synthetic reductionism appears to be in deep water. After all, assuming these are different linguistic communities there is no real disagreement: the missionary and the cannibals are talking about different things, i.e., using the term ‘good’ to refer to different descriptive properties. Yet this runs afoul of our intuitions, which countenance that they are indeed disagreeing in some shape or form. Still, the synthetic reductionist can solve this problem in a remarkably straightforward way. In a move that Ridge styles “stealing the expressivist’s thunder,” she can insist that they are indeed not disagreeing, if understood as disagreeing *in belief*, and yet accept that there is a disagreement in attitude (Ridge 2014: 89-90). In doing so, she mirrors EE’s explanation. If this sounds familiar, that is because we have already seen this; for, this is just one way of ‘going ecumenical.’

To be sure, the ecumenical expressivist might object that there are better explanations on offer for EE that in the end give it the edge. Indeed, Ridge has argued that the Stevensonian account—and, for that matter, Alan Gibbard’s more recent *disagreement in plan* account—is flawed and that EE is best combined with his own *disagreement in prescription* account. Due to a lack of space, I cannot go over what separates these three accounts. However, I do not think it necessary for me to do so anyway. After all, whichever account turns out to be superior, I see no reason to doubt that this will be just as available to EC.

This seems to leave EC and EE equally well-placed to explain moral disagreement. Since it is too early to conclude this comparison in a draw, I will use the remainder of this paper to see how these theories stand up to more pointed criticism.

3.3. A Challenge for Ecumenical Cognitivism

Michael Ridge has argued that the marriage between synthetic reductionist EC (hereafter EC) and the notion of disagreement in attitude is nonetheless, previous suggestions to the contrary, an unhappy one. Certainly, EC can explain the belief-like quality of moral thought and discourse as well as the desire-like quality of moral disagreement as long as these are considered separately. However, Ridge argues, as soon as we take on a more ‘holistic’ perspective, turning our attention to how talk of moral disagreement intuitively lines up with talk of truth/falsity of moral claims, things start to look awry.

To see how, we have to be more concrete. To begin with, Ridge forms a general supposition about how these two domains are intuitively thought to link up:

[I]t seems very plausible that to regard someone’s normative claim as false is sufficient to count as normatively disagreeing with them, and to normatively disagree with them is sufficient for being committed to the falsity of at least one of their normative judgments (*mutatis mutandis*, for normative disagreement and truth.) (2014: 91)

Subsequently, Ridge suggests that sentences that deviate from this desideratum come out awkward-sounding, to the point of being incoherent. The sentence he considers first is: “Bush and I disagree morally about the war in Iraq. However, in my view, all of Bush’s moral beliefs about the war in Iraq are true” (2014: 91). And indeed, this is a very strange thing to say. Moving to Hare’s parable, we are given the following sentence expressed by the missionary: “The cannibals’ beliefs about the morality of scalping are all true, and I disagree with the cannibals about the morality of scalping.” Again, the effect is the same. According to Ridge, this impugns EC because on this view these sentences are semantically fine—they come out coherent and true. After all, both parties’ beliefs are true—given that they come from different linguistic communities—and this is consistent with it also being true that there is a disagreement in attitude.

I think this argument can successfully be rebutted by recycling one of the explanations I set out in the previous subsection when discussing synthetic reductionism and fundamental moral disagreement. Starting with the former and more promising of the two, the cognitivist could simply cast aside the assumption that the cannibals and the missionary stem from different linguistic communities. This way,

EC would instead predict the missionary to say the cannibals' beliefs about morality are false. Why should we think these parties belong to the same linguistic community? First, notice that the fact that two groups speak different languages or are geographically separated is not sufficient to conclude that they constitute different linguistic communities, at least not in the sense of the term that is relevant here, i.e., with respect to the complex properties that regulate their moral vocabulary. What matters is whether the vocabulary fulfils the same functional role. And this it clearly does since it is used to facilitate and regulate social cooperation in a way that, in scalping and other activities, seems sensitive to the cannibals' interests. Upon asking a cannibal elder why scalping is encouraged, he would probably say that it strengthens communal ties or the like.

Having established this, it can then be inferred that this vocabulary is used to this end precisely because that is what it refers to—i.e., to the cannibals' needs or, more specifically, to some functionally complex property that sorts and balances these needs as well as various contributing “social and psychological mechanisms” (Boyd 1988: 329).¹³ Finally, given that cannibals are also members of *Homo sapiens*, the cognitivist can conclude that their interests will be qualitatively identical to those of the missionary and his flock, and that therefore they have a *shared* moral vocabulary on which scalping is wrong. Of course, this implies the cannibals would eventually come to see, e.g., the disutility, vice—in short—the wrongness of scalping. But I think that is quite plausible. (To be sure, were the issue a more intuitively defensible practice, the idea is that parties would converge under idealizing conditions.)

The other strategy is for the cognitivist to stick to the assumption that there are two separate linguistic communities, but to deny that this makes the deviant sentences come out coherent and true. The reason the claim ‘the cannibals’ beliefs about morality are true’ does not come out true is simple: the cannibals do not have any beliefs about ‘morality’, when uttered by the missionary; their beliefs refer to some other evaluative property such as honour, fierceness or, at best, ‘cannibal morality.’¹⁴ Now, you might argue that from denying that the claim ‘the cannibals’ beliefs about the morality of scalping are all true’ is true, it follows immediately that the second

¹³ No doubt this description still sounds very abstract. If it helps, Boyd draws an analogy between goodness and *being healthy*, which is also a complex functional property (Ibid.)

¹⁴ The English language does not lend itself to compound nouns as easily as, say, Dutch or German, where one would speak of ‘Kannibalenmora(a)l,’ which is more indicative of an entirely different thing.

clause, ‘I disagree with the cannibals about the morality of scalping’ is also not true, and so there would be no disagreement, which is counter-intuitive. However, that would be a *non sequitur*. There may not be a disagreement about the morality of scalping, yet there definitely is a disagreement about the practice of scalping and its continuation or ‘desirability,’ understood restrictively as causing pleasure or eliciting approval.

Even so, the Achilles’ heel of this strategy is that it leads straight to moral relativism. Honestly, I think this really is a problem, and one that I do not see any adequate solution to. In any event, my aim was only to show how this challenge can be held off. As already mentioned, I strongly prefer the first explanation.¹⁵

3. 4. A Challenge for Ecumenical Expressivism

David Enoch suspects that although expressivist theories do well to account for the practicality of morality, or the intuition that morality is about getting certain things done, they struggle to account for the objectivity of morality, i.e., that right and wrong are somehow not ‘up to us’. More concretely, Enoch has argued expressivism fails to explain the propriety of standing your ground in moral disagreement—I will call this the ‘stand-your-ground objection’ (Enoch 2011).¹⁶ Admittedly, Enoch had in mind non-ecumenical forms of expressivism, but I see no reason why it should not apply to EE as well.

To get his argument going, Enoch invites us to imagine the following two situations and to think about how each of us could reasonably proceed (the second is my embellished version of Enoch’s *Experiment*):

Tennis

We are discussing how to spend our afternoon together. I want to play tennis, but you want to watch a film. In any event, we want to stick together.

Matador

Again, we are deciding on how to spend our time together. This time I want to watch the bull-fighting show in the local arena—we are in Spain,

¹⁵ To be sure, some philosophers have no qualms with these relativist implications, see Prinz 2007 and Wong 2006.

¹⁶ Enoch calls it “the argument from objectivity’s implications” and, in another place, “the argument from impartiality.” I prefer my label because of the centrality of the mechanics of moral disagreement.

after all—but you say bull-fighting is immoral and that you would rather go cycling.

In the first situation, it is intuitive that we should opt for an impartial solution along the lines of flipping a coin, choosing one thing now and promising to do the other thing later, or alternatively, letting some impartial spectator break the deadlock. Indeed, it would be unreasonable for one of us to dig their heels in and reject all of these solutions whilst insisting on getting what one wants. In the second situation, however, things are quite different. If I were to propose said joint courses of action, it would seem acceptable, perhaps even expected, for you to stand your ground and insist that we stay away from the bull-fighting show.

So, what explains this normative asymmetry? Enoch reasons as follows. Since we are equally important from a moral point of view, our preferences, attitudes and feelings should count equally. And to count equally means that in these situations we should follow a principle of impartiality, i.e., agree to a course of action whereby “the parties to the conflict (...) step back, [and] view themselves as just another party to the conflict” (Enoch 2014: 853). By contrast, in cases like *Matador* it is not ‘mere preferences’ but our convictions that are at stake, and what makes these convictions non-negotiable is that they aim at objective truth. Obviously, this is a realist explanation. Incidentally, Enoch opts for a non-naturalist form of EC, but there is no reason to think this would be an improvement over synthetic reductionism. The important point, however, is that this explanation is not open to EE, which sees moral convictions as a special sort of preference, but a preference all the same, and so cannot explain the asymmetry.

The foregoing line of reasoning can be condensed into an argument:

- (1) If expressivism is true, then moral disagreements bottom out in conflicts of preference.
- (2) In conflicts of preference, standing your ground is never reasonable.
- (3) If expressivism is true, then in moral disagreements standing your ground is never reasonable.
- (4) In some cases of moral disagreement, it is not unreasonable to stand your ground.
- Therefore
- (5) Expressivism is false.¹⁷

¹⁷ Although Enoch talks about ‘mere’ preferences, I left this out to avoid giving the uncharitable and wrong impression that according to EE all preferences are of the same, relatively unsophisticated kind. Thanks to Michael Ridge for warning me about this.

Since the argument seems valid, any defender of EE will need to show the falsity of one of the premises. In what follows, it is helpful to bear in mind that a situation where impartiality applies is ipso facto one where ground-standing is not acceptable.

Some philosophers have tried to undermine the asymmetry captured in premises (2) and (4), holding against premise (2) that in the case of ‘silly’ preferences, e.g., dictating what another person should eat, or of uninformed preferences competing with informed ones, impartiality does not apply (Manne & Sobel 2013). But Enoch has resisted this objection by restricting the application of impartiality in (2) to those cases where coordination is not silly and where preferences are equally pedigreed (Enoch 2014: 854). Neil Sinclair has worked out another attempt at assailing (2) (Sinclair 2014). Sinclair contends that there is a difference between the kind of preferences operative in *Tennis* and another kind of preferences. What makes the latter kind normatively special is not that they allow ground-standing—this, he acknowledges, would be ad hoc—but their psychological import.

Sinclair’s argument contains two steps. First, he suggests that ‘serious negotiating concerns’ give rise to disagreements where impartiality does not apply. The term ‘serious negotiating concern’ is unpacked as follows. A *concern* is “a motivationally infused non-cognitive attitude that disposes an agent to favor certain courses of action over others.” A *serious* concern is reflectively endorsed, stable, and held to be important (by the agent). And a *negotiating* concern is a concern that is carried as part of a negotiating stance which others are encouraged to share. Sinclair gives the example of an environmentalist concern (Sinclair 2014: 428).

He then sums up why these concerns are different from ordinary preferences:

Agents are not required to sacrifice their deeply held negotiating concerns to the altar of an impartial decision procedure (such as a coin toss) purely because they come into conflict with other agents. Serious negotiating concerns are too [psychologically] important to put aside in this way (...) (Sinclair 2014: 428)

Now, Sinclair wants to avoid making what he calls “the Nagelian mistake” of implicitly—and wrongly—calling these concerns important just because they are one’s own. And so, he makes explicit that “one’s concern is important (to one), and (...) important concerns should not be set aside lightly (*ceteris paribus*)” (Sinclair 2014: 429). To illustrate and give further support to his point, Sinclair asks us to imagine a case where two nations claim the same island in the river that acts as their border. This

island happens to be equally important to both nations' historical and cultural identity. And yet, they have to come to terms about what will happen to the island. Sinclair's intuition is that each nation is permitted to stand its ground and reject impartial solutions (2014: 429).

This completes the first step. I will pass over the second step, but it is quite straightforward—it consists in establishing a relevant similarity between moral preferences and serious negotiating concerns. The whole argument, then, is that since a certain class of preferences that rules out impartiality can also be found in moral disagreements the asymmetry collapses, blocking the objection.

I do not find this argument compelling. To be sure, I have no qualms about the second step of the argument; I can see very well the similarity between serious negotiating concerns and moral attitudes. However, this similarity amounts to very little, because I reject the first step and in particular the claim that in conflicts of serious negotiating concerns impartiality does not apply. Obviously, where one party's preference is such a concern and the other party's preference is of more light-hearted nature, impartiality does not apply. But that still leaves those cases where both parties have such a concern at heart, and here I think impartiality does apply. More precisely, I do not think turning ourselves over to an 'altar of an impartial decision procedure' in such situations signals a lack of respect for these concerns. Rather, it is a sign of equal respect. Also, I think Sinclair's rhetoric of "sacrificing" or "putting them aside" when this occurs is misleading; for, they retain their weight throughout the procedure. In fairness, Sinclair's criticism is helpful insofar as it suggests a way of improving the stand-your-ground objection, namely, by incorporating a clause—call it a 'parity clause'—specifying that impartiality does not apply to just any opposing preferences but only those that are on a par with each other in relevant respect such as their pedigree or their psychological import—Sinclair explains the latter in terms of "motivational strength and pervasiveness within the agent's motivational profile"(2014: 428).

Concerning the illustration, I want to begin by expressing that, if anything, it does Sinclair's argument a disservice. First, this is because, as I understand it, a serious negotiating concern is a very sophisticated mental state, and it is hard to see how nations can be attributed with these, even by way of analogy. Second, even if I should understand the illustration as attributing such a concern to the nations' citizens or citizen bodies, I still find it hard to see how the fate of an island in a river, or for that

matter any international dispute, could be of such concern in someone's personal life—unless one is personally affected by the outcome.

To repeat, however, I would still think it unreasonable for either side to stand its ground even if I conceded these points. To see why, consider a modified version of the biblical story of the Judgment of Solomon. In this version both candidate mothers care deeply about the infant: they both have a serious negotiating concern. It seems to me that here flipping a coin or something of that sort is the right thing to do, again on the basis of Enoch's intuition that we are all equal from a moral point of view and that, assuming parity, our concerns should have equal weight. In addition, there is the urgency of finding a mother for the infant. Finally, Sinclair mentions that the prospect of better "mutually agreeable" solutions such as joint sovereignty could justify standing one's ground (2014: 429). However, I do not see this as ground-standing. Rather, I see this as smuggling in an impartial solution through the back door, making this point self-undermining.

So, absent a realist-sounding explanation about why one of the parties with a serious negotiating concern ought to stand their ground, I see no way for EE to explain the asymmetry, and so I would have to conclude that the stand-your-ground objection is sound.

4. Conclusion

My aim in this paper was to compare the ability of two types of ecumenical theories, Ecumenical Expressivism and Ecumenical Cognitivism, to explain fundamental moral disagreement. Though I this comparison was far from exhaustive, I draw the following conclusions.

To begin with, any expressivist explanation of moral disagreement, while a natural fit for EE, will also be available to EC by virtue of its ecumenical character. The challenge that, in doing so, EC fails to preserve conceptual links between the truth/falsity of moral (normative) claims and (normative) claims and claims of moral (normative) disagreement founders in two ways, both of which involve a synthetic reductionist version of EC. First, it can be argued that the deviant sentence presented by Ridge as evidence is based on the mistaken assumption that there are two separate linguistic communities. Once we let go of this assumption, the predicted sentence will feature disagreement *and* falsity. Also, EC can, if necessary, draw on the idea of idealizing

conditions to explain how this disagreement is to be resolved. Second, if the assumption is accepted, it can be denied that the deviant sentence comes out true by arguing that the referent is determined by the linguistic community of the speaker. Although this preserves disagreement, it does give way to moral relativism, which is why I prefer the former response.

On the other hand, the challenge that EE cannot explain the propriety of standing your ground in moral disagreement succeeds. Certainly, sometimes a preference with strong psychological import will make ground-standing seem reasonable. However, I have argued that since equal preference call for impartiality, this is not the case when parity of such preferences obtains, and so there remains an asymmetry between moral disagreements and disagreements in preference.

This can be summed up more generally. Although EE handles morality's practicality very well, it struggles to make sense the objectivity of morality, especially as it bears down on moral disagreement. By comparison, EC matches EE in explaining the former and can draw on its cognitivist theoretical resources to account for the latter.

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